

1968: Melitón Manzanas, a secret police chief in the Basque city of San Sebastian, is killed in ETA's first deadly attack. December 20, 1973: Prime Minister Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco is assassinated in Madrid in retaliation for the government's execution of Basque separatists. September 13, 1974: A bomb is placed inside the "Rolando" cafeteria in Madrid, killing 12 civilians. September 1985: First ETA car bomb in Madrid kills an American citizen and wounds 16 Civil Guards. July 14, 1986: A car bomb on República Dominicana square in Madrid explodes at the passing of a small bus carrying young Civil Guards, killing 12 of them and injuring 50 people. June 19, 1987: 1987 Hipercor bombing: A car bomb explodes in the underground car park of an Hipercor supermarket in Barcelona, killing 21 civilians and injuring

amongst them several small children. December 11, 1987: 250 kg of explosives inside a car bomb explode next to the Civil Guard's Casa Cuartel in Zaragoza, killing 11 people and injuring 40. May 29, 1991: A car bomb loaded with 70 kg of explosives is detonated inside the Civil Guard's Casa Cuartel in Vic (Barcelona), which is used as a school. 10 people are killed (4 of them children) and 28 are injured. August 1991: A car bomb explodes at the passing of a military van at the junction of López de Letamendi and Ramón y Cajal streets in Madrid, killing 6 soldiers and 1 civilian and injuring 15. December 1995: Assassination attempt on King Juan Carlos of Spain failed. January 1995: Nearly successful attempt to kill José María Aznar, the leader of Spain's right-wing opposition and future Prime Minister. A car bomb loaded with 40 kg of explosives detonated at the passing of his official car. He is saved by his vehicle's armor plating but a bystander is killed in the process.



December 11, 1995: A car bomb explodes at the passing of military van in the Vallecas district of Madrid, killing 6 civilians who worked for the army. January 17, 1995: Assassination of José Antonio Ortega Lara, civil servant in a prison in Ibañeta. ETA demands the relocation of imprisoned ETA members for the restoration of their freedom. Ortega Lara is rescued by the police 532 days later (July 1996).

*Among the*  
**Women of the**  
*Eileen MacDonald*  
**ETA**

From "Shoot the Women First"  
by Eileen MacDonald

Contained within this text are detailed accounts of violence,  
which may be triggering for some folks.



*Tacoma, Wa*

email:  
lunariapress@gmail.com  
blog:  
lunariapress.blogspot.com

## Among the Women of the ETA

*"We have so much more to lose."*

## **A BIT OF CONTEXT AND A FEW BREIF THOUGHTS**

This zine was originally the first chapter of a book called *Shoot the Women First* by Eileen MacDonald. MacDonald, a British journalist, set out to interview women involved in “militant”/“violent”/“terrorist” groups as well as women who acted alone. While the book provides great insight into these organizations and individuals, MacDonald is by no means sympathetic to the causes of those she is interviewing and writing about. Her interest in these groups extends only to the role of these women and their relationship to violence: whether or not women are more brutal, more committed, and more dangerous than their male counterparts. She explores the idea that women have a greater capacity for violence because of their biology: they give life, and are therefore more able to take it; and that patriarchal relations makes women tougher because they feel that they have more to prove, that they can be equally, if not more, violent and brutal than men.

It may seem odd that an anarchist distro chose to publish a chapter from a book written by a journalist who is obviously not an anarchist, about a group of militants of whom all but a small minority are not anarchist and are engaged in a non anarchistic struggle. However, I find it important for many of us to look beyond the narrow history of anarchism, to look outside our subcultures and political ideologies to learn from others, to observe how others have fought and to see the commonalities between our struggles. I am especially interested in the struggles of women. When learning about militant women of the past and present there are times when I am concerns with the struggles that women engage in, other times I am interested in the women who struggle.

What I appreciated about this particular chapter was that the women in the interviews did not seem to dwell on the fact that being women made them different than their male counterparts but seemed to embrace the idea that they were equal, both as individuals and as comrades, but were willing to discuss that differences that did exist and analyze how that affected their struggle. Many of the texts out there about women in militant roles written by anarchists are about the same few people or groups or have the same perception and bias. This article seemed more raw, more honest. This is why I enjoyed this book and decided to reprint that chapter - it was different from zines about militnat women I had read before. And while I recognize that the ETA is not anarchistic, many of the tactics that they discussed in the interview are things that some anarchist embrace – clandestine action, bombings, attacks on police and judges, etc. And as such I found these women’s thoughts relevant.

A labyrinth of passages and dark, cobbled alleyways makes up the old town of Bilbao. It is here, in neon-lighted bars and in the shadows of high and ancient buildings that the heart of the ETA, Europe's most venerable urban guerrilla movement, beats strongest. Its lifeblood is the young people who throng the old quarter; its pulse is the drumbeat and the haunting flute of the three slow-stepping musicians, two men and a girl, on their march of the streets.

Red graffiti scars the walls of the fifteenth-century church: the letters of the ETA, the proclamation CIVIL GUARD, MURDERERS!, with the promise of vengeance underneath. On one wall is scrawled the story of a woman called Maite, a comrade killed by the police; inside a nearby bar a rough pen-and-ink drawing hangs of another woman of the same name, similarly killed.

Standing in this desperately packed bar it is necessary to shout, but the women I am with are relaxed; they are among friends. Everyone is young, everyone has a friend who is involved in the struggle for the Basque homeland in one form or another, and the women I am speaking with have that special camaraderie born of joint suffering.

Alazne's was the saddest face I had ever seen. She could have been pretty, with startling blue-green eyes and fair hair, but she looked utterly caved in as if she were waiting for the next punch. It was not for several hours that her air of total defeat was explained. Amaia, big and bouncy, with a ready answer for any and all questions, was entirely different. She was the Basque answer to Roseanne Barr. With very little preamble, and with scant attention to the other customers, she launched into her story: "I was detained for being a member of an armed band – somebody else gave me away."

Both Alazne and Amaia had been arrested and tortured and had broken in the end. One swiftly learned that there was no blame attached to eventually blurting out information; indeed, it was entirely understandable: "With the methods they use, everyone breaks." Txikia, four foot eight inches tall, weighing ninety-one pounds, had been tied hand and foot to a beam and then beaten. She had hung like a monkey staring at the ceiling splattered with the blood of previous detainees.

Their torturers were members of the Spanish police force – a fact recorded in Amnesty International reports. The police and the Spanish Civil Guard are ETA's chief targets, and the ETA commandos are taught at an early stage of their involvement the kinds of torture they should expect if caught. Several ETA personnel have died in detention; others, it is claimed, have been targets of GAL (the Anti-Terrorist Liberation Group). GAL is allegedly made up of mercenaries, soldiers, and police and has threatened to kill one Basque activist for every ETA victim.

In 1990 it was revealed that the GAL has direct links with the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, and two police officers were charged with the attempted murder of five Basque refugees living in France. Numerous cases were cited by the ETA women of comrades – male and female – being found dead under mysterious

circumstances, such as a couple whose bodies were found at the foot of a ravine in June 2009. A suicide pact, said the police. It only emerged later that the man, who had supposedly shot his girlfriend in the back of the head before jumping to his death, had died by drowning. Another man was found dead by the roadside – with burned feet. All were said to be the work of GAL or overzealous police interrogators. GAL also operates a policy of “determent” – a woman student activist had the letters ETA carved into her face.

ETA stands for Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (“Homeland and Freedom”) and was set up in the late fifties to combat repression under Franco. The dictator had banned the Basque language and culture, partly to punish the Basques for fighting on the Republican side during the Civil War, and partly to enforce his dream of a united Spain. Hundreds of ETA personnel and their supporters were imprisoned and tortured, but its key leaders fled to southern France and set up training camps. From there ETA units were sent over the border to attack targets in the Basque country and in the rest of Spain. A degree of sympathy among the French authorities for a people who had fought fascism allowed the movement to flourish.

In 1975, when Franco died, the Basque population hoped that they would finally be allowed independence, but although their language and some cultural traditions were reinstated, the majority of the population felt that democracy had failed them. In 1979 the Basque country was granted a degree of autonomy, including a local parliament, but to ETA this was simply seen as a barrier to full independence from Spain.

Today, ETA continues to carry out dozens of actions a year. Although politicians, police, and the Civil Guard are its main targets, it has also expanded its actions into ecological and moral fields. Industries perceived as threatening the environment are attacked, cinemas showing sex films are bombed, and drug dealers are kneecapped or killed. Responsibility for the actions are claimed every month in ETA communiqués, which are then published in the Basque newspaper, Egin. The language of the communiqués is flowery and terribly polite; occasionally deeply remorseful. For example, on October 9, 1989, one reads: “We claim responsibility for the failed action against a member of the Spanish police in Basauri, following the placing of an explosive charge under his car. We very much deplore the accidental injuries involuntarily caused to his neighbor, Carmuelo Alonso Lopez, and we wish is prompt and complete recovery.”

In the same month ETA killed two policemen; placed bombs in factories producing the French cars, Peugeot, Citroën, and Renault; and failed to assassinate the Spanish consul in Rotterdam, who was targeted because the Dutch had extradited four “Basque political refugees” to Spain.

The also bombed the offices of a company constructing a motorway through the Basque region and sent a letter bomb to the director of public works, who they claimed ignored public feeling in going ahead with the project. There is a long polemic attached to this action, urging the government and the construction

“They only way in which I think that women fighters are stronger than men is that they are more used to pain than men are. Perhaps, because of that, men give out more information under torture than women.” This observation was one that came up in several conversations with women from different groups: because we are women we are better at suffering; we have to endure it in our everyday lives, and therefore we are stronger than men.

We left the drab office that was Egizan's headquarters and went to a bar in the old quarter. Again there was a picture of Maite (whose names means “love” in Basque) above the bottles, and Txikia told me the story of her death at the hands of GAL. Matter-of-factly, she commented: “We know any of us can be killed at any moment and perhaps our bodies will never be found.

“Oh, my parents worry about me. The fact that I was tortured was very difficult for them; it reminded them of the Civil War. At first, you know, they couldn't believe that I had been involved with ETA; they were sure it was all a mistake. But the overwhelming thing was their determination to protect me, that was their first thought.”

She does not see her father much now, she added, but when she does he always buys her a meal and gives her money. She wondered aloud why it was that she alone in the current generation of her family had decided on the armed struggle. “It is odd that I should be the one,” she mused. “My sister had married and settled down and had nothing to do with the movement. For myself, I keep putting off having children. I think, I am young, I can wait a bit longer. Having children would change my life so much.

“It is strange that it is me alone who has carried on the role of the fighter from my grandfather.”

“I remember the sense of elation when Franco died. Everyone though things would change. Not overnight, and not that things would all be wonderful, but we believed that things would improve. But gradually it became evident that, after all, Spain was still ruled by a very strong state structure. Our dreams of self-determination did not materialize and there was still oppression.

“I left school and went to teacher training college, but at the same time I joined the amnesty movement. I was twenty-one when I joined ETA.”

In 1988 Txikia became one of the first members of Egizan and now channels her undoubted fighting spirit into campaigning for better conditions for Basque women, both in the home and in society. Yes, she said, the work was demanding, given that she also has a full-time job as a Basque translator, but it was satisfying. Not, however, she suddenly shot out with a sparkle in her eye, as satisfying as being a gun-bearing ETA woman.

She signed for what might have been: “Working as I do now, day to day, you put a hell of a lot of effort into it for sometimes very little visible result.

“I think that with arms you can cut through all this work, and get the results very quickly. It is true what the revolutionary writers say, the daily struggle, is the hardest. Violence is certainly necessary for our struggle.”

She illustrated her point: in 1981, ETA kidnapped the chief engineer of a nuclear power station that was under construction in Lemoniz, near Bilbao. They demanded that, in return for the man's life, the semi-built power plant should be demolished, starting in one week's time. The construction company refused to negotiate and a week later the man was found dead. ETA also bombed the station and killed two employees – after that work at the site was stopped.

Little Txikia enthused: “It was a victory for ETA. For years the local people had protested about the nuclear station, held demonstrations, sent petitions. They had been ignored; the construction company went ahead. Then after ETA acted, like a spearhead, what everyone wanted was achieved. It showed that violence was the only thing the authorities understood.

“In that situation, ETA and the people worked together: ETA would not have killed without the support of the people and the people would not have got what they wanted without ETA.”

Her words betrayed no remorse for the dead engineer, a thirty-nine-year-old father of five, who had been a modest and popular figure in his local community. Nor did she refer to a demonstration by some 10,000 people through Bilbao demanding the man's release. The killing, in fact, led to a serious criticism inside ETA and caused intense disgust throughout the Basque region and Spain.

Having given her example, Txikia moved on to deny that women are in any sense more ruthless than men. “I think it is a police view because they think that women should be the ones who care for others, not fight them. The women I knew, once they became committed, were very determined fighters. They felt that they were doing what was right, and they followed an action through unhesitatingly. But I couldn't say if they were more committed than men.

company to take notice of public disquiet, including the statement that “ETA... expresses its fervent wish to avoid by all means any form of painful outcome.” The missive ends more threateningly: “A negative response, will, unfortunately, and very much to our regret, newly aggravate the situation created after the start of the works on the present project. We trust that prudence and good sense will prevail for the good of our people.” “Otherwise,” it might have added, “you will be dead.”

In 1990 there was a spate of ETA letter bombs, but several were opened by postal workers or employees of the intended victims. When Pilar Fernandez opened a letter for a prison official and received serious injuries, ETA apologized to her, but added: “With the intention of avoiding a repetition of serious occurrences of this nature, we insist once more that no one open correspondence or parcels nor addressed to them personally.”

More boldly, another communiqué claims the responsibility for killing a woman judge: “Execution of the state prosecutor, Carmen Tagle, one of the most important representatives of the National Court, which had become the spearhead of direct repression of numerous patriots and revolutionaries from the Basque country as well as from the rest of Spain.” ETA has also in the past conducted a campaign of bombing vacation resorts, although the explosives used were designed to frighten rather than kill.

The organization funds itself in a variety of ways: armed robbery, kidnapping, extortion, and donations from sympathizers, including a number of Basque priests, who has traditionally supported ETA's goals, although more recently have come to deplore the escalating campaign of violence.

Over the years, ETA has evolved from a group seeking a social-democratic Basque homeland, into a Marxist-Leninist one. This change, and others including arguments over the use of violence, has resulted in much splitting and factionalizing, and now there is only one “armed spearhead”, called ETA-m or “Millis.” Their motto is allegedly “Actions unite; words divide.” ETA is regarded by police forces throughout Europe as one of the most highly trained and organized terrorist groups.

Infiltration by the police has caused the organization to institute a system of “sleeping commandos.” These men and women lead apparently normal lives, with regular jobs, but at the same time are being trained for specific actions. Often the commandos are unaware of each other's identities and receive their instructions in code from an unknown source. Once their action has been carried out the commandos immediately resume their everyday lives.

The ETA, like the IRA and its political wing, Sinn Fein, has Herri Batasuna (“Popular Unity”), and during the most recent elections for the Basque parliament in October 1990 they retained their 1986 figure of thirteen seats out of seventy-five, coming in third out of the eight parties. These figures give the lie to some Spanish press reports that the Herri Batasuna party (which alone out of all the political parties in the Basque country refused to sign a pact condemning violence



in 1988) was losing grass-roots support.

I witnessed the extent of local support not just for the political wing, but for ETA itself, shortly before the elections in 1990. The organizers had told me there would be a march of 10,000- 15,000 people through the streets of Bilbao. It was estimated that the actual turnout was closer to 50,000, and the marchers ranged in age from toddlers to old ladies. It was like an outdoor mass; sparklers were lit as wave upon wave of demonstrators surged through the city center; elegant, middle-aged women rubbing shoulders with students, business men, and children, all chanting, “ETA, ETA, Liberty.”

Initially, there was a great deal of nervousness and suspicion in granting me interviews with ETA women. The elections were coming up, and an ETA leader and ten commandos had just been arrested. A week before I arrived, 500 pounds of explosives, bomb-making equipment, and weapons were seized in a cave. I might have been an infiltrator or a police informer and no one in the movement wanted to accept responsibility for trusting me. Eventually the problem was solved by a woman in Belfast I had met through Sinn Fein, who vouchsafed for me being a journalist.

My initial briefing was given by two sisters, Begona, a nurse, and Yolanda, an economist, both in their late twenties. Begona worked with Egizana (literally in Basque, “Act Woman!”) a feminist movement affiliated with ETA's political wing; her younger sister worked for Herri Batasuna. They explained that Herri Batasuna, and an amnesty group seeking release for ETA prisoners, were legal organizations. Others, like Egizana, for example, were illegal because they demanded a homeland for Basques. ETA personnel may be members of any of these groups.

Yolanda was bright and bitter. “We are allowed to speak the Basque language, but we cannot study it at all levels. For instance, at university there are very few subjects you can study in Basque, very few university level books in the language, and hardly any teachers are taught their subjects in Basque. Besides, learning is not free; you must pay, so some people cannot learn it.

“We are told that the language is expanding rapidly because we are allowed to have our own Basque television station. This station has two channels, but one of them is in Spanish and the other one frequently advertises in Spanish.

“There are about two and a half million Basques here, yet we have three police forces – the Civil Guard, the national police, and the Ertzaintza (Basque police). When they first set up Ertzaintza, we were told that it would replace the other forces, but that has not happened, so we have lots of police. We have four governments: the Basque government for three of the Basque provinces; the government of Navarre for the fourth; then there is the Spanish government, which is really the one in charge; and the French government for the quarter million Basques living there.”

Although both sisters fully supported ETA's actions, they denied that they personally knew any active ETA women, which is not surprising as that knowledge could result in a prison sentence. Yolanda summed it up: “I don't know who is

In spite of the treatment, Txikia was far from broken: “My experience in prison convinced me that the armed struggle was the only way to get these people to change. When I came out I desperately wanted to continue with the commandos, but of course my face was known to the authorities, and it was too easy to check up on my movements. Some ex-prisoners get telephone calls in the middle of the night from police and are followed everywhere. For security reasons, I could not join another ETA unit.

“When I got out, the movement held a huge celebration party for me and within two months I was working for the amnesty group.” It had been through working with this group for four years before that Txikia had first decided to join ETA. It was a route to violence that was fairly common among the women I interviewed. First the support of prisoners, then perhaps out of a sense of frustration that the prisoners were still being mistreated, the realization that the only way to stop injustice was to personally strike back. Women seemed to become far more emotionally involved than men with the suffering of prisoners, and when they made the transition from supporter to guerrilla, appeared to carry their deepest sense of commitment with them into battle.

“I was in constant contact with men and women who had been tortured and were serving long jail sentences. I was working on their behalf and I realized that I should fight too. It was not a sudden decision; it was a natural progression for me, becoming politically more aware and feeling I had to do something to fight back.

“From as far back as I remember I was angry about the oppression of the Basque people. I came from a working-class suburb of Bilbao, where Basque was spoken in the streets. At home, although my parents were Basque, they could not speak the language because Franco had banned it when they were children. It always seemed so wrong to me that they could not speak their own language. My grandfather had fought on the republican side during the Civil war, and my parents were still afraid. In the streets outside I learned to speak Basque and became aware of the Basque struggle for homeland.

“From an early age I was angry at the injustices done to us by Franco. At school the teachers were fascists; they were all ‘Viva Franco’ people. The Basque language was forbidden; it was looked down upon as something backward. If you spoke it you were made to feel bad as if the Basques had absolutely no cultural heritage.

“My mother had only two children, me and my sister, who is seven years older. She was in a dilemma: on one hand she wanted us to do well at school, go to university, get a good job and be independent women; on the other hand she was afraid for us and very protective. As I grew up and started to seek my own identity I felt it was very strongly interwoven with the Basque movement. I wanted to be a Basque woman.”

In November 1975, when Txikia was fifteen years old, Franco died. By then she had already joined the Basque Patriotic Youth Movement and had been attending meetings and Basque cultural activities arranged by a group of left-wing Basque priests in her neighborhood.



with her boyfriend. “There were about twenty police, all armed to the teeth, and they grabbed everything – books, photographs, anything they saw. They were shouting abuse at us, particularly me, calling me a slut's daughter, a whore; meaningless swearing. They arrested both of us and I was taken to the police station in Bilbao.

“Straightaway they began beating me. I remembered they were all big men standing around hitting me. They had tied me up by my wrists and ankles to a beam of wood so that I was swinging like a monkey between two tables. I felt my back was breaking.

“There method was to first break you down physically and then to apply psychological torture. They taunt you with the fact that you know about other comrades who have died under interrogation. They threaten that they would arrest my mother and father. That was a terrible thought, knowing that they could do that and perhaps torture my parents as well.

“I was tortured for seven days, the first three in Bilbao, and then I was taken to Madrid headquarters for the next four days. Being taken to Madrid is the worst thing that can happen to anybody. The interrogation rooms are underground and the ceilings are vaulted, painted green. The blood of the prisoners is splattered in the ceiling – it is like a medieval torture chamber.”

She confessed that the memory of her failure, when she broken down and talked, still haunted her. Hesitantly, and with downcast eyes, she continued: “I feel very guilty about it. It was so very difficult not to say anything at all when you are being tortured like that. I had to speak in the end, even though it was very much against my will. It is hard for me to admit that I talked and it has left me with a feeling of guilt every since.” Did she betray her comrades? “Yes,” she whispered, “but I did not give enough information for anyone to be arrested.”

Nine years later, she still suffers from back problems caused by her treatment under interrogation. She referred to her transferal to Madrid prison where she served eighteen months as “liberation” after her time spent with the police. They had threatened her with six years imprisonment, so there was an added feeling of release at the relatively short jail sentence.

On her admission to the prison, she was given a medical examination by the prison doctor. According to Txikia, he looked at the extensive bruising, the battered hands, and dismissed her in perfect health. “He said, 'Oh, that's nothing. Today your bruises are purple, tomorrow they will be yellow.' He did not even check my hands to see if any bones were broken.”

It was 1981 when she was imprisoned and her cell mates were other ETA women. Apart from giving each other support and encouragement, they also shared everything they had – food parcels from home were particularly important as the prison meals were “disgusting.” However, she remembered the time bitterly: the women warders, she said, continually harassed the prisoners, opening and slamming cells doors in the middle of the night and subjecting them to verbal abuse.

ETA and I don't want to know.”

Occasionally the sisters broke into a language that left the interpreter open-mouthed. It was Basque, and bore no relation to Spanish or French. They discussed a question about the formation of ETA cells in their own language before returning to Spanish.

“They have had to get more and more complex. Occasionally a cell is formed where people live together, but at other times no one knows each other. They have taken a lot of care because of infiltrators and they have done very well.

“ETA decides everything by committee before taking on actions. In the summer they put a railway network under siege, by blowing up sections all over the state in order to get maximum attention. It is the only way – the Spanish government only understands the fighting language.”

Begona was the first sister to have become politically active within the Basque separatist movement, but she laughed when it was suggested that she had influenced Yolanda to join. Her younger sister, she said, had a mind of her own. More seriously, she replied, that yes, their parents were very worried about them. “They have been afraid for a long time. They think what we are doing is very dangerous and they are frightened of the police.”

She explained that although the Herri Batasuna party had four MPs who were entitled to sit in the Spanish parliament, all of them practiced abstentionism as a matter of principle. Even being a duly elected member of parliament does not, it seems, protect one from the attentions of GAL. Begona spoke of one MP, who had been murdered on the way to Madrid to be sworn in – the only occasion when Herri Batasuna MPs will attend Spanish parliament.

“At first it appeared that he had been murdered by two right-wing police officers, but at the trial it came out that one was not right-wing at all. We believe that he was murdered on the authority of the government. He was killed on the anniversary of the death of Franco, a very right-wing anniversary when something always happens.”

Neither sister could even hazard to guess at how many ETA commandos were currently operating, or what percentage of them were women. However, women make up about 10% of imprisoned ETA members, so that would be a guide, they suggested. Although they both insisted, as did every Basque activist, that ETA was only one part of the national struggle for independence, it was obvious that they, and everyone else, regarded the armed group as an elite.

Nowhere was this clearer than in Begona's account of the setting up of Egizan, which had only occurred in 1989 – late, one might think for the emergence of a feminist group in a revolutionary struggle. Begona explained that after years of various women experimenting, and failing, with a feminist movement in the Basque nationalist organization, it had been the ETA which had taken decisive action.

“In 1980, there had to be a women's movement, but it had failed due to political arguments. There were disagreements on how women's problems were viewed;

some people thought that the very notion of women having their own problems was too bourgeois.

“It was ETA that insisted that there should be a women's organization set up because they saw that women did have special problems, not inside the movement, but in society – and it is they who have done the most to make sure Egizán actually happened. ETA had a great ability for political analysis, and is very articulate – more than any of the other groups.

“Now we have four hundred members and we shall be going out into the villages with our message. All the women in Egizán have a very highly developed political awareness but I do not think any of them belong to ETA, although some could belong to both.”

I asked why ETA had been able to sort out the confusion about how to deal with women's problems. Was it because they were so many women in leading roles in the organization? Begona, who has never been a militant, did not know, but other former women commandos agreed that, yes, that was the reason.

It was surprising news – I had nearly omitted ETA from this book because of an article I had read by Robert P. Clark, entitled “Patterns of the Life of ETA Members.” He stated that ETA strongly opposed women's emancipation because “their place is in the home” and “they talk too much, especially to their parish priests.” I asked all the Basque separatist women I interviewed to comment on this quotation, and the responses were identical – fury, and denial. There have always been women commandos and operators in ETA, I was informed sharply. To prove the point, in the course of twenty-four hours I met four.

Alazne and Amaia had both been commandos; Alazne with an extreme anarchist offshoot of ETA called the Autonomous Anti-Capitalist Commando and Amaia with ETA-m. The sad Alazne had been imprisoned for four years, and the gregarious Amaia for five. Each had been convicted of membership in terrorist groups; there had be no evidence extracted from them, even under torture, to charge them with anything else. Yet, within a first hour of meeting, sitting in a crowded café in central Bilbao, they talked freely about the sort of actions they had been involved in. They only asked that their names be change, a request I complied with. It showed an enormous degree of trust, and I felt almost protective towards them.

Both had been “sleeping commandos”: Amaia working as an assistant in a bakery; Alazne for the tax department of a village council. Alazne, who was thirty-three but look far older, spoke quietly with her eyes down.

“I come from a village near San Sebastian that is ninety percent Basque-speaking, but that was not the reason I joined the commando unit. The village was hardly a center of political knowledge or activity, and my parents certainly did not have any influence on what I eventually did. I became aware of injustices and the repression of the basque people when I was a teenager, but it was not until I was twenty-four or twenty-five that I joined the movement. I got involved

or where they went for a drink after work.

Her information would have resulted in the deaths of those she observed, but she was entirely unrepentant. She derived satisfaction from her role, and enjoyed the sense of camaraderie in the group. Although the majority of its members were men, and included her live-in boyfriend, there were also some women commandos, whom Txikia admired and resolved to join. She was not, after all, just a woman in a repressive society; she might be a tiny woman, but even a tiny woman is a force to reckon with if she is carrying a gun that she knows how to use.

The decision to become a guerrilla was not, she explained, one that a woman took lightly; she had so much more to lose than men. It was clearly a subject she had given much thought to: “Women face far more difficulties in going underground and becoming fully operational. Undoubtedly it has a lot to do with the traditionally strict attitudes in our society towards women – that they should stay at home and have children. That sort of thinking is changing but we are all still conditioned to want security, and in joining a commando cell there is the very strong possibility that you will lose your family, your home, and of course, all security.

“For men it is easier. Traditionally they are expected to be away from home, earning the money. They know that whatever happens to them, their wives will still look after the children. But if a woman does the same thing, she must cut all those ties and abandon those feelings.

“For me there were not so many problems. The boy I was living with was just a boyfriend, and besides, we were both doing the same thing.”

She emphasized that her boyfriend had not influenced her in any way about her decision to become “fully operational.” “I cannot remember which of us joined first, but it was through the group that we met. I don't know of any ETA women commandos who have been driven to frontline action by their men. Though in the case of general support I think it may be very true that women get involved through their men – doing such things as providing safe houses, financial support, that sort of thing.

“But women who actually become commandos do so on their own and are seen as equals to men in decision taking. The people who get to the level of armed struggle are far more committed to the revolution than anyone else. Politically they are more advanced and that means the men are more aware of women's rights.”

In Txikia's unit, everyone from the newest recruit to the most experienced fighter was taught what to expect if captured: “Torture. We had psychological preparation and were told about the different types of torture and how to recognize what was coming next. If you know what was coming it is easier to brace yourself for it.”

The tuition stood her in good stead when she was arrested and detained, first in Bilbao police station and then at Madrid police headquarters.

It was 2 a.m. when police broke down the door of the flat where Txikia lived

even say such things – and Gloria said it with such conviction.

She did, however, refer to the bombing of a department store in Barcelona in 1987 as a mistake by ETA, and one for which the movement apologized: “The store was part of a big chain and the bombing took place when ETA was targeting chain stores that had a state interest. Normally the bombs would be timed to explode when there was no one in the stores; but in this case, the bomb went off without warning and between fifteen and eighteen people were killed.

“There was an enormous amount of self-criticism inside ETA for that action, and from outside, too, obviously. People in the organization were shocked because it is never intended that innocent people should die. We do not want indiscriminate killing, and it was something we should not have done. We deplored it.” This was more understandable; Gloria appeared genuinely sorrowful – but she had to go on: “There was criticism of the action, too, because we had counted on the police to pass warning that there was a bomb in the department store, but in this case the authorities deliberately decided not to pass on the warning. It was for propaganda purposes – they wanted there to be an enormous public outcry against ETA.”

Alazne engendered sympathy and respect for her suffering and her gentleness and Amaia was a sort of likable and honest rogue. Both had suffered for their actions, and their rhetoric was tempered by experience. Their accounts of torture had been deeply moving, so much so that one had to force oneself to remember why they had been arrested in the first place. Gloria's words, however, made me shudder. It was difficult to reconcile that two sides of her personality: the woman who had felt so humiliated and vulnerable when she had to ask her interrogators for sanitary napkins and the revolutionary theorist who ruled violence was OK and that the children of her enemy had better watch out.

The young woman's pseudonym, Txikia (“the small one”) could not have been more appropriate. It was difficult not to think of this tiny creature as a child. Any such thoughts were, however, quickly dispersed when Txikia began to speak. She was deeply frustrated that after serving an eighteen-month prison sentence she could not rejoin an ETA-m unit and become what she wanted to be – a frontline woman guerrilla. Then there was her experience of torture and the lasting sense of guilt that she had in the end broken down and given information. Finally, she firmly believed that violence, including murder, got things done far more quickly and effectively than words.

Txikia had been in an ETA-m unit for only a few months when she was arrested. As a new member she had been involved at a fairly low level – gathering information on targets for the movement – but freely admitted that she would have gone on to higher things if her career had not been cut short. She refused to say how she had performed her duties, but one imagined that she would be a good intelligence officer; no one would have suspected that the minuscule figure with the sweet face was carefully noting when the police officers were changing shifts

because a man I knew was a member.”

This appeared to lend credence to the most commonly held view that women get “mixed up” in such movements through relationships with men, usually their boyfriends. I asked if many ETA women had become involved in armed action via this route. The response was immediate and explosive.

Alazne laughed and shook her head; Amaia launched into a diatribe for several minutes until the interpreter help up her hand. Roughly, and without expletives: “absolute rubbish,” she translated.

Alazne went on. “The man I referred to was just a friend. He participated in an action that I approved of and because I knew him, I was able to get into the group.” Yes, she had carried out numerous actions, “as a result of which people had been killed,” she admitted carefully. No, she did not believe that women in armed groups felt they had to prove anything to men. Amaia, who was still simmering, joined in: “If women decide to do an action, they will do it for themselves! They don't have to prove anything to men.”

Amaia took over the conversation, something she was apt to do: “ETA is the vanguard of our revolution. If the revolution plans to change society, it means that the vanguard has to change its own attitudes towards women in the first place. You can hardly change society without changing the macho attitudes that men have, and even women too. Woman can be equally 'machista' in supporting the supremacy of men. In that way they pass on the violence towards women that is at the heart of macho men. The revolution, if you like, starts at home.”

But she also showed some sympathy toward women who were dependent on men. “Here, for instance, a lot of women depend on men economically and so there must be cases where women are drawn to armed struggle through their men. But certainly that is not what happened with us.

“There are fewer militant women in ETA because women are only just beginning to come out into the street. It is part of the emancipation process. Men are used to being seen as strong and macho and women are expected to follow them – both men and women are still indoctrinated. In ordinary life, in work, women perhaps have to be much better than men just to show they are equal to them. But in revolutionary groups, the basic understanding is that we are equal.”

One wondered whether some of the anger and frustration that had led Amaia to strike out violently against authority was rooted in her society's acceptance of macho violence against women – with the women themselves passing on the acceptance from one generation to the next. She had seemed extremely angry at the notion that ETA men could influence their female comrades in any way at all – either in drawing them into the group, or in making the women guerrillas feel they had to prove themselves to the men. ETA is, after all, like many armed sections of nationalist movements, viewed as the elite; and if men help the reins of power at such a level, the group would simply be reflecting the society they were fighting against. In such a society where women seem powerless to break

the chain of violence against themselves, being a commando is certainly one way of being pretty powerful.

Amaia was eighteen when she joined the cell of ETA-m; before that she had participated in Basque demonstrations. “I was born in Bilbao and grew up here, so I became aware of the movement when I was very young. When I was around fourteen years old I began to meet new friends and we went to demos and events. We all wanted to do something more than just accept the treatment we got.

“When I became a commando, I lived a sort of double life. I lived here with friends and worked in the bakery as an assistant. But at the same time I was a member of ETA-m and carried out five or six actions over three years. My targets were mainly the police, the Civil Guard, and I also took part in bank raids to obtain funds for the group.

“Usually you don't go and live with others in a house to prepare an action. You would just maintain contact with someone who would occasionally tell you that you were needed to do something. Every now and again a supporter would give up a house for a set period of time for a group to live together. But mainly it worked this way: a message would come in that I was needed for an action. If it happened during working hours, I was say that I had to rush off to the doctor. Afterwards I would bring a medical certificate.”

I imagined Amaia, rather a portly figure, about to pop her try of scones into the oven when the message arrived. It seemed comical, and yet the message would presumably have ordered her involvement in an act of murder or robbery.

“Anyway, even though I worked, I had the evenings free – I was available from seven pm till one am – and of course there were the weekends as well. And between each actions there were gaps of several months. I did everything from gathering information on targets, to carry a gun, doing armed robbery, and planting bombs...”

She was blasé as she recounted the depth of her involvement, as if she were reeling off items on a shopping list. So, she was responsible for killing people? Oh no, she insisted, she had never directly killed anyone. I did a double take and asked her about the bombs she had just mentioned. How did she feel when she heard that her bombs had been “successful”?

“Satisfaction,” she shot straight back. “The bastards, they deserved it. Yes, I planted bombs that killed people.” I wondered whether she was as confused as I was by her two different answers in so short a space of time. She appeared to be proud of killing, and she had no remorse. Was she as hardened a killer as she appeared? I felt that she was blocking the truth out, almost playing the part of the merciless guerrilla. I asked whether she had ever looked into the terrified eyes of one of her targets.

Amaia's response was much slower than normal, quick-fire delivery. “No, I have never looked someone in the face then shot them. I imagine if you had to go up to someone and shoot them dead, that would be difficult, that would be much harder than just leaving a bomb.” She trailed off, then regained some of her

Revolutionary tax does away with the messy business of kidnap. They simply use the threat of its well-established existence to extract large sums of money from businesses in the Basque country. Some businessmen have resisted the tax and paid dearly; most of the business community, including banks, have paid up quietly while publicly condemning ETA. It is believed that some members of GAL are paid mercenaries hired by businessmen who are fed up with paying the revolutionary tax.

My tentative inquiry only brought broad grins from around the table. Yes, they all nodded, the tax brought valuable funds to the movement. It was clear they saw no moral dilemma in the practice: “It is obviously the big companies that we target because we wouldn't want to ruin smaller ones. We address our demands to the owners or top people in companies and banks who have a lot of capital and are exploiting people. They money we get in tax is used to pay the workers back, to liberate them.” Was the threat of kidnapping necessary? This brought a jeer: “They wouldn't give the money voluntarily, would they?”

It all seemed dreadfully reasonable, as long as one excepted the revolutionary reasoning, saw business as legitimate targets, and ignored the fact that they were subjecting human beings to terror.

Then I asked how they justified killing innocent people by mistake. In 1987, for example, an ETA bomb exploded in the living quarters of the Civil Guard; eleven people were killed, including four young children.

Alazne, who had been silent for some time, spoke out: “Obviously nobody likes that, or wants it, and it hurts us all. We do not do it deliberately, but such things do happen in war.”

Amaia chimed in: “The press uses such tragedies against us. If women or children are killed as a result of an action then they say we do not care a damn, we are ruthless killers of innocents. That is not true. It is very painful for us, but it happens by accident and we consider it is inevitable.

“At the same time, it often happens that the police and Civil Guard abandon children when they take their parents away for interrogation. The children are just left in the bakery or with neighbors, not knowing what has happened. That is cruelty to children. Tragically, people who have nothing to do with the armed struggle get caught in the middle.”

Gloria, who had grown increasingly human and agreeable as the evening had worn on, wrecked in: “In the cases of Civil Guard living quarters and other bomb attacks – these organizations cannot hide behind their women and children. The women and children have no business living there; but if they do, they are part of the organization, part of the repression against our people, and as such they are a legitimate target.”

One did not know whether Gloria sounded so ruthless simply because she had never killed or injured anyone, or whether if she had not been captured for operating ETA radio she would have gone on to blow up kindergartens full of Civil Guard offspring without turning a hair. I had never met anyone who could



women to play supporting roles, once a woman is part of a commando unit, she is accepted as an equal comrade. She laughed: “Do not imagine, though, that all men in ETA are women’s libbers – many of them are still bound by social prejudices and traditions; they have to be educated too.”

There are ways, all three agreed, that women can achieve more than male commandos by the simple expedient of their sex, although as women commandos become more commonplace it is not as easy as it once was.

“In the past the very macho system worked in our favor,” recalled Amaia. “If the police caught a woman’s husband or boyfriend they assumed the woman was innocent. In that way woman got away with a lot because the police could not image woman playing an active role in armed struggle. We used to use their macho ideas to our advantage. If you were caught, even if you did not have a boyfriend, you said you did, and that you no idea what he had been doing or got you involved in. Or if you had done something, you cried. ‘He made me do it.’”

Even today, they claimed, the police are still unable to accept that “certain kinds” of women could be members of an ETA cell embarking on an action. The secret, apparently, is to dress very elegantly and wear lots of makeup in order to appear middle class and respectable. “Several actions have been carried out by very elegant women,” Gloria said.

A asked Alazne and Amaia, neither of whom looked as if they relished cosmetics and elegant clothing, if they had ever disguised themselves in such a manner. Amaia chuckled: “No, but once I was with a male commando in a bar when the police can in. I pretended to be, well, terribly involved with him, when in fact we were doing something very different indeed.” Planting a bomb? She just laughed.

Another woman was mentioned, Belen Gonzales. Ms. Gonzales is apparently the most wanted ETA woman on the police computer and according to the authorities was personally present at every shooting an bombing in Madrid. A couple of years ago she was trapped in a police cordon in the city. She strolled over to where a young couple were standing and asked if she could “borrow” the boy for a few minutes. She embraced the bemused youngster, then in a loving clinch, they walked straight through the police barrier.

Amaia roared with laughter: “All the police could see was a pair of lovers. Afterwards, when they realized she had escaped, they were absolutely fucking furious, much angrier than if it had been a man that got away. There was a strong element of hurt male pride that they could not catch this bloody woman and that she had slipped through their net. She was a real thorn in their side.” Ms. Gonzales was now believed to be safely living in South America.

Everyone appeared to be in a relaxed mood now, so I posed the question I had been rather anxious about asking – the use by ETA of what they called “revolutionary tax,” but what others would probably call extortion. This method of fund-raising relies upon the fact that ETA had a policy of kidnapping wealthy and prominent businessmen and killing them if the ransom is not paid.

revolutionary poise: “If you are a commando you accept that it might happen – that you will be asked to kill. There is satisfaction in belonging to such a group. It must happen, violence is necessary for the struggle, and you feel you are doing something.”

She had skated away from the thin ice, but she was still disturbed. How did she feel about killing people with that bomb? The question appeared to pierce the defenses she had put up around her emotions; it was almost as if, extraordinary as it may seem, she had never before addressed herself to the consequences of her actions. Her mood suddenly swung from one of bravado to despondency. She buried her head in her arms. For a few seconds there was silence, then she looked up, almost beseechingly.

“Oh, God this is getting hard,” she groaned. “Look, we hadn’t prepared ourselves for this interview; we didn’t know what sort of questions were going to be asked.” They had to go now, she added, the demonstration was about to begin, but they would come back later.

I almost did not expect to see Amaia and Alazne again, but out of the night and the throng of demonstrators they appears, smiling and waving. A third woman, Gloria, who had been found by Egizan in the interviewing hours, joined us. We walked through the labyrinth to a “quiet” bar – one where you had to keep you voice only at a raised pitch, rather than shout. On the way, Gloria explained that she had not been a commando, but she had been sentence to fourteen months in prison for working for ETA’s radio station. She had met Alazne and Amaia while serving her sentence and between all three of them was that special bond of former prisoners. Gloria was thirty-three and seemed sensible and thoughtful; she was also, as was to be demonstrated, extremely tough.

Alazne and Amaia seemed fortified and ready for whatever questions I might throw at them, but they could not get a word in. How, I asked, did they cope with feelings of guilt for their actions?

The quiet Gloria erupted: “There is no need for anyone to feel guilty when they participate in a revolutionary action – no need at all. It is not a personal thing. There is no personal guilt; there is no place for individual guilt in revolutionary violence. Violence is necessary for the struggle, and if anyone feels guilt, it is for themselves to deal with. The responsibility for killing is the movement’s.”

These were hard words. In the struggle for basque homeland, violence is justifiable and no one who kills need bother about it. It was interesting that Amaia and Alazne, who had killed, now seemed prepared to explain how they coped with their emotions while Gloria, who had not, had all the propaganda off pat. More than that, she was doing her best to stop the other two from talking. Even Amaia had grown silent and was nodding respectfully at the rhetoric, as if it provided all the answers to questions that confused her. It became obvious that unless the intransigent Gloria gave the word, precious few would be uttered by the commandos.

Throwing caution to the wind, I quoted Mr. Clark and his belief, based on

an interview with an ETA man, that women talked too much to have any useful role in ETA. Amaia appeared to be suffering from an apoplectic fit; Alazne's dead eyes blazed and Gloria gawped. When the storm died down, the interpreter translated: "They are fucking furious at the idea and want to know who said it. They said it much have been a male chauvinist, or someone playing a joke on the author." Gloria seemed to have decided that rather than continue under any misapprehension, Amaia and Alazne should speak.

Alazne's story was horrifying and the reasons for her immense sadness became all too clear. After two years with her commando unit, during which time she had been responsible for some killings ("But I did not shoot anyone face to face"), she was arrested: "I was parking the car when the police got me. It wasn't that someone had given me away; it was the car. It had been traced to the organization. The two policemen asked me for my ID, then told me to get out of the car. I was taken to the police station where they tied me to a table, so that my back was hanging over the edge. Every time I tried to lift me head up – lying in that position was extremely painful – they hit me.

"They brought in a vat of water and pushed my head into it so that I nearly drowned. They did it again and again; they wanted names, names of my comrades. After three days of torture, of incredible pain, they forced me to telephone my home and tell my friends I was well and staying with someone, so that they would not worry and would not alert anyone that I had disappeared. They also made me phone work and tell them I was fine, and make up an excuse about my absence. I knew that nobody knew where I was, and no one would suspect anything, which was very frightening. It was as if I had disappeared, and the interrogators kept telling me that they could make me disappear – they had done it before to many comrades and they could do it again.

"They put a plastic bag over my head to the point of suffocation. And they threatened my family. The things they did and said were really unbelievable.

"I had to break, and I did. The police knew that I had comrades who were hiding in France and who were due to come to Spain to carry out operations. They were aware that I know they were coming so they made me call them and say it was OK to come. They came by boat, and when they were near the shore, the police ambushed them. They put on search lights and killed all of them.

"There were five people in the boat, all men. Two died instantly, and three jumped overboard. Two more died in the water, but the third survived and is now in prison. The fact that I set up the ambush is the most difficult thing for me to live with."

She took a deep breath before continuing: "I did more than set it up; the police took me with them to the ambush because I had to give the signal to the men in the boat; otherwise they would not have approached the beach. My hands and feet were tied by a piece of rope and the policemen held the end of it. As soon as I had given the signal, they pulled me down. I had only known one of the men. I had worked with him before, but the others were all my comrades. I lay on the

"They wanted him because another young man they had arrested had referred to him. All the prisoner could remember about my ex-boyfriend is that he had gone out with a girl called Gloria. He had met me because at one time my old boyfriend and I had gone traveling with him and another girl. He knew the other girl's name was Arantza and that she knew me and where I lived. He could only remember that Arantza worked at a particular factory.

"The funny thing is that Arantza is a very common name, but that did not stop the police from going to the factory and arresting every girl with that name. There were a lot of arrests! Eventually they found the right one and she told them my address. Apparently before they had tracked me down, the police had arrested two other girls who had gone out with my ex. We had only split up a year previously and he had had two more relationships! These other girls had not been able to tell the police where he was, so they came after me.

"Unfortunately, while they were waiting for me to return, the police searched my flat and found papers that proved I was working for ETA radio, which was illegal because they say it incited armed action. They arrested me and interrogated me for seven days. Apart from one blow to the stomach right at the beginning they did not torture me physically, only psychologically. They tried to implicate me in ETA actions and they interrogated me in a very strange way. They sat me in a chair and then stood around me – sometimes six or seven of them, sometimes just two. They questioned me constantly – 'Do you know so and so from university?' 'When did you last see X?' They shouted all the questions; it was very intimidating.

"Because they had been in my flat for six hours – it is their habit to arrest people in the middle of the night – they had had time to read all my letters and papers, and so they knew everything about me. They had read letters from people I had not seen for years, but I did not realize this. It seemed very strange that they knew so much about me, even about old friends, and it was very unnerving. Another game they played was to say that my lawyer had arrived. A man came into the room and I thought, 'He is here to protect me.' I soon realized though, that he was a policeman, and in the end I couldn't trust any of them or anything they said.

"Luckily, one of my neighbors had seen the police arrive at my flat and had notified my friends and family. Although I was unaware of it, they very next morning news of my arrest was on the radio and in the press, so it was public knowledge. Even though everyone knew where I was, the police still held me for ten days, and the interrogation without torture was bad enough. Then they sent me to Madrid.

"During the interrogation I had become so frightened that I signed a statement saying that I had done all sorts of things I had not. When I got to Madrid headquarters I told the police there that I had only signed because I was afraid of torture, so I was just charged with working for ETA radio."

Gloria was at pains to point out that although ETA men on the whole expect

knew where I had gone and anything could have happened to me during that time. After that my family found out, and my mother and sister – my father had left us some time before – were very supportive.

“I was held in the Commissariat for ten days being tortured before I was put on trial. Like Alazne, I tried to tell them about the torture, but the judge said no one was interested in my allegations. I was only charged with membership in an ETA gang because there was no proof of any actions I had been involved in.”

Not unnaturally the police interrogators are chief targets for assassination by ETA commandos and are apparently moved every three months to a different police station to avoid being identified. Amaia added: “Now the interrogators wear balaclavas so that we cannot identify them. When I was arrested, they had not started doing that, but they kept shouting at me not to look at them, to keep my head down.

“They are prime targets not only because of what they do to ETA people, but because of the way they are protected from justice by the government. There are a lot of them, and they are very highly trained. We have passed on information to Amnesty International and there had certainly been contact between AI and the Spanish anti-terrorist squad, but the torture goes on. The French government has asked questions about the treatment of prisoners but mostly there is little proof.”

The women considered that the sentences metered out to ETA supporters and those in contact with ETA gangs were particularly harsh. It seems that the Spanish police have the power to arrest and detain on suspicion, and that young people that take part in demonstrations are automatically suspect. All three claimed that they knew people currently serving lengthy prison sentences whose only crime was that they were friends of commandos.

In the last ten years, they said, the authorities have realized that ETA could not exist without its infrastructure of support from many people in the community. Consequently, equal seriousness is now attached to those giving succor to ETA cells – gathering information, supplying the occasional safe-house, carrying information – and that generally means women. Gloria paid tribute to these essential back-room workers: “Without their support, direct action could not take place, and so the police view any work for ETA as nearly the same as an actual commando. Ten years ago people charged with supporting ETA would have received small sentences; now they serve considerable time in prison.”

She was a case in point. Her ex-boyfriends, an ETA suspect, was being hunted by the police. Arriving home one day, Gloria found a gun at her head. “I had gone out with friends and didn't get home until eight o'clock in the morning. I found the lock had been broken and the door was ajar.

“I was a bit frightened, thinking there had been a break-in and wondering if the burglar was still inside. I went in cautiously and suddenly there was a pistol at my head. There were five policemen and one policewoman. They had arrived at two a.m., broken in and then waited for me. They were looking for an old boyfriend of mine, and they thought I might know where he was.

ground and I heard the shots. I have to live with that.”

She had told her story unemotionally, but in the dim light of the bar her face shone with tears. “I was charged with collaboration with an armed band and was sentenced to six years. At my trial I tried to talk about the torture and how I had been forced to participate in the ambush, but the court refused to let me speak. The police maintained that my comrades had been killed when they opened fire; it had been an armed confrontation and the police acted in self-defense. They said there had been no witnesses.

“It is quite customary for them to say such things; or sometimes they pretend that commandos they kill have committed suicide. I believe the legal system is in the hands of the government. If a body is found with the feet burned, there may be suspicion, but there is no evidence that the person was tortured. The police suppress information, and in my case, it was my word against theirs, and who is going to believe me?”

Why had she not told her story to the press? She just shrugged: “Basically, the newspaper take the government's press releases and police statements and police statements as read. That is why it is so important we have our own newspaper.

“I spent four years and three months in prison. The amnesty section worked on my behalf and I did maintenance work while I was in prison. That was why I was released early, for working in prison, not for good behavior. I got out two years and five months ago in May 1988.” (She said it without calculating, as if she would always know the number of days she had been free.)

“I started work for the amnesty movement. My group had folded in 1986 because it was very small and it had no grass-roots support. It had always shared the same aims of the ETA, so it was not a question of me changing my views. Now I could not take part in any armed action, because of my prison record.”

She had stayed composed even when crying and she was someone I felt had been terribly, almost mortally hurt in both a spiritual and physical sense. My sympathy warred with the fact that she had killed. She left the table, and Gloria said that when she had first met Alazne in prison, she had looked utterly “caved in.” I told her that had been my impression of Alazne too. Gloria was surprised: “Oh, but she is so much better now. Then she looked utterly destroyed.”

Alazne briefly resumed: “My arrest and imprisonment were very hard on my family. They were terribly upset when I was arrested, but they were always there at the prison to visit me whenever they could. It was very tough on them because they couldn't entirely understand what I had done, yet they kept supporting me. We are a much closer family now and they pay me far more attention than they used to.”

When Alazne was jailed in 1984 the authorities had a policy of placing all ETA prisoners together which resulted in a community of self-help. It was undoubtedly the support of her comrades that helped her regain her sanity. Recently, however, the Spanish government has introduced a new system of splitting ETA prisoners up so that the mutual support no longer exists.



All three women attributed their relatively stable psychological state to that closely knit prison community. None of them, even the wounded Alazne, has sought psychiatric care, although they admitted that some ETA prisoners have needed it.

Amaia explained: "In the prison with other women who had experienced the same torture, we were among friends, and there was a process of normalization, which only those who had suffered in the same way could bring about. In our experience, after the torture, we all had some form of amnesia. We couldn't remember little things, like the names of some friends, or streets. It was very disturbing. When a new prisoner was brought into the wing, we would talk to her about that loss of memory and assure her that she was not mad, that she would remember those things in time. Now the prisoners are all isolated, and only allowed visits from their families, not their friends. They are in a much worse state than we were."

When it came to torture, Amaia went on, the police seemed to be harder to ETA woman than men. Many criminologists believe such treatment can be explained by the way society regards violent women; that they are "doubly deviant." They have not only committed a crime, but in doing so have threatened the traditional image of women as gentle, law-abiding creatures.

"It is almost as if they wanted to punish us more for daring to be involved in the armed struggle. They cannot except that women can do these things. They shout at you, laugh, abuse you verbally, physically, and sexually, and they treat you as if you were unnatural deviants. They particularly torment women who have children with the fear of what will happen to them. Because of this there are only a very few mothers who are commandos; mostly they play supporting roles.

"Of course police use the fact that we are afraid of rape and threaten us with it. Unfortunately it is not simply a threat; women have been raped during torture, even raped with a truncheon. When the interrogators tell you that is what they are going to do, you know it is no idle threat. They say, 'Remember what happened to so and so...'"

Torturers are barbaric, Amaia concluded. They were mad, and there was "something wrong with them." The maddest and most barbaric of all were the women. Women police officers often took part in the torture of ETA women. All three women remembered that there had been a woman present during their torture. Alazne said rather dully that it had not made much difference to her, although she added, "The woman was sometimes far more brutal to me than the men." Amaia recalled that it had made her feel very uncomfortable that a woman was present, hurling obscenities at her broken body; the woman was an "added psychological torture." Gloria, who had escaped physical torture but had been subjected to psychological terror and verbal abuse for seven days, had been almost shocked by the woman interrogator: "I remember thinking, How can you take part in this torture against another woman? How can you stand there and let these men do these things. How can you? The worse thing for me was that I had

my period and I had to ask for towels [sanitary napkins], and they all laughed at me. It made me feel very vulnerable."

It was a fascinating perspective on how women who have chosen to participate in violence viewed other women who had made the same decision – but on the other side. It is a generally held view that those who commit terrorist acts or either mad or bad, particularly women who are expected to nurture life, not to destroy it. These three women justified violence as part of their revolutionary struggle; yet they used the same terms of condemnation against women interrogators as are generally applied to themselves and expressed the same bewilderment at how women could be torturers. This is not to say that torture is not the most hideous of crimes; but then how many victims of bombings and shootings do not die but spend their lives being tortured by their deformities?

It was shocking to be told that women in the Spanish police force participate in torture – "I cannot comprehend how they can live with themselves," said Amaia. Yet, if part of the reason that there are Basque women in ETA is due to a natural progression of emancipation (Amaia's own words), why should it not be surprising that women participating in the destruction of the commandos should have graduated to using the foulest of means at their disposal?

"They can do it and live with themselves," continued Amaia, "because they are supported by a structure; they are given official sanction to torture us. Their job is to dehumanize us, but it is themselves they end up dehumanizing." One thinks of how many times the same thing has been said about revolutionary groups who have committed acts of terror – the perpetrators are referred to as "mad dogs," "beasts," "depraved killers," and their deeds as "inhuman." Possibly, if one were to meet a woman torturer outside office hours, one would find that she is warm, friendly, thought provoking – as human – as these three women.

Amaia moved on to her own story of arrest and torture. She seemed to want to play down the details as if in deference to Alazne's appalling account.

"I was arrested in Bilbao in 1983; I think because someone gave my name under torture. I was in the street, shopping, when four policemen surrounded me. They asked for my ID, then said, 'Come with us, there are just a few questions we want to ask you.' I was put in one police car, with another one driving behind. I remember I still had my shopping bag with me.

"In the police station I had the same kind of torture as Alazne and I was also given electric shocks. They do that because it leaves no marks – it is the same with putting a plastic bag over your head – and without scars it is very difficult to prove they used torture. Then there was the more acceptable form of interrogation: the good and the bad questioner, but they changed roles so you never knew who the good one was.

"They police went to my house and arrested the boy and girl who lived there; they were not part of the organization at all and didn't know anything. They were released after a few days, but they police told them, 'Don't say anything to anyone about her arrest or else we will arrest you again.' For three days no one